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Trouble-Shooter Rushed to Laos

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WASHINGTON.

William F. Bundy, President Johnson's new Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, is on his way to Laos for a first-hand inspection of a post-coup situation that had Washington confused but hopeful yesterday.

The collective sigh of relief was almost audible at the apparent collapse of the weird one-day coup in Vientiane, the Laotian capital. And perplexed officials expected Prince Souvanna Phouma to remain as the landlocked Southeast Asian kingdom's Premier, perhaps with a different Cabinet line-up.

Beyond that, Mr. Bundy had a lot to investigate in the land where Neutralist Prince Souvanna for 22 months has headed a government whose Vice-Premiers are his half-brother Prince Souphanouvong, founder and leader of the pro-Communist Pathet Lao organization, and Gen. Phoumi Nosavan, head of the Rightist faction but evidently not of Sunday's abortive Rightist coup.

It was President Johnson who announced, in his New York speech yesterday, that Mr. Bundy had been dispatched to Laos to look the situation over. The President also said he was "encouraged by reports of progress toward the re-establishment of orderly, legal government" in Vientiane.

Mr. Bundy, the 46-year-old former Assistant Defense Secretary who moved over to the State Department last Feb. 29, was in the Far East when the latest crisis broke in Laos. He was travelling with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, on an inspection tour of the anti-Communist guerrilla war in South Viet Nam.

Also in the Rusk party was the American Ambassador to Laos, Leonard C. Unger. He rushed back to Vientiane to warn the coup leaders that United States was "categorically opposed" to the removal of Prince Souvanna from the Premiership.

Ambassador Unger was able to shout a brief message of encouragement to Prince Souvanna across a garden fence yesterday as the Prince stood on his balcony before leaving with Gen. Phoumi and the two Rightist coup leaders for a talk with King Savang Vathana in Luang Prabang, the Laotian royal capital.

It was not entirely certain just who was in control of the party or whether the Rightists were in a position to exert more pressure on Prince Souvanna's conduct as Premier. The Prince denied, however, that he had resigned from office as he threatened to do last Saturday before the coup was underway.

Prince Souvanna and Gen. Phoumi returned from the meeting with King Savang later in the day, along with the coup leaders, Gen. Kouprasith Abhay and Gen. Siho Lamphoutakal. None of the parties to the conference would discuss it with newsmen.

In Washington, the confusion over the coup was compounded further by the suspicion that its titular leader, Gen. Kouprasith, may have been little more than a front man for Gen. Siho, the military police boss who was nominally second in command of the brief revolt.

Secretary Rusk, who returned to Washington from his Far East trip, had nothing to say about the crisis in Laos, although he declared that the situation in South Viet Nam is showing "steady improvement." Despite France's refusal to go along with the other seven SEATO nations in supporting the anti-Red Viet Nam war, he added that he had been "heartened by my trip as a whole."

Reports reaching Washington pointed to the conclusion that the generals who lead the Laotian coup against Prince Souvanna thought they could bring it off without much notice internationally. But they were deluged with protests from all sides and all shades of the political spectrum, including the U.S., Britain, France, the Soviet Union and Communist China.

Washington remained convinced that Prince Souvanna is still Premier despite the coup leaders' announcement that he had resigned. Officials suggested that the purpose of the conference with King Savang might have been to seek a royal mandate to form a new three-cornered government—embracing Rightists, Neutralists and Pathet Lao as before, but perhaps with some reshuffling.

In the U. S. Senate yesterday there was unease as well as applause over the collapse of the Laotian coup. Majority leader Mike Mansfield, D., Mont., said he was pleased that the revolt had failed.

Otherwise, he said, there would have been "a further shifting of Cambodia toward Communist China, a possible further weakening of our position in Southeast Asia and the partition of Laos between the Pathet Lao and the revolutionary group."

Sen. Hugh Scott, R., Pa., disagreed on the ground that the U. S. should not have thrown its weight against the anti-Communist Right in Laos. "I do not think we should discourage the anti-Communist element in any country where we can properly encourage it," he said.

In South Viet Nam, U. S. military advisers said the anti-Communist government had brought off one of the most successful counter-attacks of the long guerrilla war. It happened Sunday in Kien Hoa Province, some 50 miles south of Saigon in the critical Mekong Delta country.

Two companies of Viet Cong guerrillas attacked an outpost near Ba Tre before dawn, seizing wives and children of the defenders as hostages. But the defenders—members of the Self-Defense Corps—regrouped and recaptured the post in what the Americans called an "excellent counter-attack carried out quickly and efficiently."

Government losses were listed as 14 killed and 26 missing. U. S. advisers counted 15 Viet Cong dead on the battlefield and said aerial reconnaissance indicated 67 more dead or wounded were carried off. The Vietnamese Defense Ministry estimated the total Red losses at 100 killed or wounded.

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